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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: WILL BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S "NEW REVIVAL" PUSH

ASIDE TURKMENBASHY'S "GOLDEN AGE"?

¶1. Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Niyazov era was characterized by the official "Golden Age" ideology, whereby Niyazov promoted himself as the "Father of Turkmen Nation." His long deceased parents and brothers were recruited to become role models for the country. Community elders were employed to support Niyazov's cult and to appease minorities. Photos of a young Niyazov pervaded schools. Following Niyazov's death, the period of "New Revival" began, indicating a break with the past, but also continuing the pattern, so far to a lesser degree, of elevating the president's family members. Time will tell to what extent the "New Revival" ideology assumes the scope of its predecessor. The Turkmen government's increased sensitivity about international opinion may curb the emergence of a new personality cult that would rival Turkmenbashy's. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) Officially, Niyazov's "Golden Age of the Turkmen" is not yet over (It was supposed to encompass the entire 21st Century, according to the slogans). Nonetheless, the Turkmen government under Berdimuhamedov has introduced a new slogan - "New Revival" - intended to characterize a "new" era. The new slogan begs the question why the country needs a new revival after a golden age. As explained in the Turkmen press during the first days of Berdimuhamedov's rule, the nation "needed new revival after the nation suffered the sudden demise of Turkmenbashy, the Great Leader." There was a need for "New Revival" for those who felt the nation had been left without its "caring father." Niyazov had managed to occupy the minds of an entire generation. Young Turkmen who are now 25-30 years old remember him as a figure who built their statehood. To build this father-like image, he used various tools, for example copying the practice of past Turkmen leaders and prominent Muslims by writing the Ruhnama - an epic

meant to provide spiritual guidance. Niyazov sanctified his own family, virtually creating a cult for his mother Gurbansoltan, father Atamurad, even his brothers, who died in Ashgabat's earthquake without reaching even adolescence. All issues involving women invoked the name of Niyazov's mother. His father served as an example of the brave soldier and excellent accountant, apparently his profession. Military schools and economic institutes were named after him.

¶4. (SBU) Apart from his family members, Niyazov made use of individuals whose prominence dated back to the Soviet era. For example, two collective farm leaders, Muratberdy Sopihev and Sadulla Rozmetov, served the ideological purpose of being "respected, industrious old men" serving the best interests of their country. For more than 60 years, Sopihev has been a chief of a collective farm - "Soviet Turkmenistany" - located near Ashgabat. Because of its proximity to the capital, Sopihev's farm was always pampered by local communist party secretaries and was frequently used as a showplace for visitors. Rozmetov, the chief of a collective farm located in northern Dashoguz Province, is an ethnic Uzbek who, during the Soviet era, was close to both Tashkent and Ashgabat, although his collective farm was on Turkmen territory. Rozmetov, as well as former Grand Mufti Nasrulla Ibadullayev, were used by Niyazov to appease the Uzbek population in Turkmenistan's two eastern provinces, Lebap and Dashoguz. Rozmetov is already 90 years old, Sopihev

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is over 80. Thus, it is only a matter of time before these ideological symbols of Niyazov's "Golden Age" become a part of history.

¶5. (SBU) The traditions of the old cult, Niyazov's "Golden Age," have continued with a lower profile under Berdimuhamedov. Concerning the substitution of Niyazov's iconic family members, it seems attempts to sanctify members of the Berdimuhamedov's family have to date remained cautious. Only Malikguly, Berdimuhamedov's father, seems to have an active role in creating a new national ideology. Attempts by government ideologues to create another 'Gurbansoltan-Eje' (the cult name of Turkmenbashy's mother) out of Berdimuhamedov's mother have fallen short. In Turkmen schools, the Niyazov placards and photos have been replaced by those of Berdimuhamedov, depicting the life path of the president, especially his educational achievements, including his diploma from the Turkmen Medical Institute and his PhD in dentistry from a medical institute in Moscow. The figure of Berdimuhamed Annayev, Berdimuhamedov's grandfather, was also used recently to set an example of a "good teacher" when the country celebrated "Knowledge Day" on September 1st. The school in the resident's family village of Izgant was named after his grandfather. Also, the practice of rebuilding the ancestral village of the sitting president, carried out by Niyazov, has continued under Berdimuhamedov for his own village.

¶6. (SBU) While Berdimuhamedov has chosen not to put up any statues of himself (only of historical figures), and there are certainly no more photographs hanging of Berdimuhamedov than there were of his predecessor, hagiography of the president's accomplishments and exploits have increased over time. According to the official press, this president can do everything. He writes medical books, traditional cookbooks, and books about the Ahal Teke horse. He flies jet planes, drives race cars, tanks, trucks, and performs brain surgery. He is an expert in all kinds of sports, too.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: As Turkmenistan approaches the third anniversary of Berdimuhamedov's rise to power, the regime is showing signs of heading down an ideological path resembling the pattern of the Niyazov era. There still remain significant differences between the two eras, especially the attention that Berdimuhamedov appears to pay to Turkmenistan achieving international standards in a variety of areas. A repetition of Niyazov's eccentricities and excesses, many of which still color the world's view of Turkmenistan, seems unlikely to occur with the current president. Still, in many respects, Niyazov era practices remain the model here, and Berdimuhamedov continues to substitute his predecessor's ideology with his own. It remains to be seen how far it will go. END COMMENT.

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